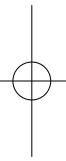


The Use of Debate in English Writing Class

Noriko IWAMOTO

1. Introduction



Generally, the English word “debate” is translated into the Japanese word *tooron*. However, *tooron* often refers to a “round table discussion or forum,” and is closer in meaning to “discussion” than “debate” (Inoue, 1996). Therefore, the Japanese translation *tooron* seems to be a combination of discussion and debate. On the other hand, in English there is a clear distinction between debate and discussion; while people discuss in order to explore an issue, in debate people take sides to support or oppose a particular statement (Brieley, 2005).

In the late 1980s, debate was more often translated as the loanword *debeeto* than *tooron* (Inoue, 1996). By using the word *debeeto*, the characteristics of debate which the Japanese word *tooron* does not possess became evident: critical and logical thinking skills. Japanese people are said to lack these skills but in fact they are very important skills in the internationalized society of today. Indeed, the introduction of these skills was considered one of the efforts to westernize Japan (Suzuki, 2008).

Without critical thinking, people would accept information and opinions uncritically. This is very dangerous in the present society which is filled with a lot of information through media and the Internet. We need the ability to examine critically in order to make proper judgments and choose appropriate information. Additionally, in a global society, the people to whom we need to convey our ideas do not always possess the same language and culture. They may not understand the Japanese way of conveying ideas such as *sassi* (mind reading)

and *ishin densin* (immediate communication from one mind to another). Therefore, we have to construct our ideas logically to make ourselves understood. Many researchers maintain that we are able to learn these skills through debate activities (Cotton, 2002; Erikson & Murphy, 1987; Matsumoto et al., 2009; Sasaki, 2006).

Recently, debate activity has been used in classes at school or as business training in companies. At university, debate is often conducted in English speaking classes. Moreover, debate activity is also considered to be useful in English writing classes (Cotton, 2002; Kayashima, 2009; Kimura, 1998). In this paper, I would like to report how a debate activity was introduced into a freshman writing class and how the students responded to the activity.

2. Background

2.1. What is Debate?

According to Matsumoto et al. (2009), debate is used to discuss an issue between affirmative and negative sides in order to persuade listeners logically. For one proposition, or theme, debaters on the affirmative and negative sides each present a constructive speech, refutation, and counter-argument. In the constructive speech, members of the affirmative side explain why they support the proposition, while those of the negative side explain why they are against it. In refutation, the affirmative side attacks the negative side's constructive speech, and so does the negative side. In cross-argument, the affirmative side responds to the negative side's refutation, and so does the negative side.

In the process of debating, we are able to learn logical thinking and critical thinking. Both the affirmative and negative sides need to construct their arguments logically in order to convey their opinions clearly to the other group and to the judges. If their arguments are not good enough, their ideas will be refuted easily by the opponent group. Therefore, debate activity is good training to improve logical thinking skills. Moreover, during a debate, we not only need to state our opinions but we also have to refute the other group's opinions. Rather than accepting the opponent's opinions without question, we have to consider them critically and examine their credibility and appropriateness. By doing this, we

can improve our critical thinking.

However, some researchers point out that critical and logical thinking skills deviate from a Japanese tradition that values harmony and group-orientedness. Cotton (2002), who conducted a debate in his university class, explains that “Japanese students tend to rely more on the strategy of appealing to one’s humanitarian or emotional side to garner sympathy for their cause rather than using cold, hard facts to win support for their case. Yet, in a western-style debate, this method of argumentation would likely to be perceived as unsupported or even illogical” (p.62). Nakano (2005) reports that debate is not welcomed in daily life and that Japanese university students who participate in intercollegiate debate tournaments face some psychological difficulty when engaging in debate. For example, one student said, “If I thrash an opponent logically, emotionally the relationship gets worse.” This is because in Japan attacking people’s opinions is likely to be taken as an attack on their personality. A female student said that she was suffering from the prejudice that girls should not argue.

2.2. Use of Debate in Class

As stated above, debate activity enables students to learn how to think critically and logically. Due to this benefit, debate has been introduced into classrooms recently. Although the number is still small, the teachers who have introduced debate into classes have reported the great benefit of it. The Classroom Debate Association (2003) presents many actual examples of debates done by secondary school students. For example, students in a junior high school in Kanagawa engaged in a debate in a Japanese class with the proposition “our junior high school library should include comic books,” and a high school in Okayama conducted a debate in a social science class with the proposition “Japan should introduce an environmental tax.” Even elementary school students have experienced debate in class. For example, Ikeuchi (2007) reports that the 5th graders of Seigakuin elementary school conducted a debate on whether “Seigakuen elementary school should install a vending machine.” During the debate activity, students were very excited and were willing to talk about the issue. In Higuchi (2006), the 6th graders at an elementary school improved their logical thinking

skills, willingness to discuss the issue and willingness to accept others' opinions. As these researchers show, elementary and secondary school students can successfully engage in debate.

At universities, debate is often conducted in English, especially in English speaking classes. For example, in Brierley's (2005) English speaking class at a university, most of the students had never done a debate, so he used many exercises such as matching of topic and motions, which helped students to actually engage in debate in English. Cotton (2002) successfully introduced English debate to his English conversation class at college by teaching how to use the language of negotiation, to construct clear arguments and predict the opposing side's statements. Thiemann (2009) taught an English debate course to graduate students, where students discussed energy policy. This experience made the students feel more comfortable in addressing scientific issues in English.

Debate activity is useful not only in speaking but also writing, for debate helps Japanese students notice the structure of English writing. Because culture is said to influence writing styles (Kaplan 1966), there are some differences between English and Japanese writing styles. As Hinds (1987, 1990) argues, English rhetorical style is "writer responsible" because the writer conveys clear statements and aims to convince the reader of his/her opinion. On the other hand, Japanese writing is "reader-responsible" where the writer does not necessarily intend to convince the reader but rather suggests his/her idea indirectly.

These differences in writing styles sometimes influence students' writings negatively. However, through debate activity, students are able to learn how to state their opinions logically in a western way. Stewart and Pleisch (1998) describe an organization tool for debate called the "classification tree" and explain how the tree structure of debate mirrors the organization of an English paragraph. Moore and Parker (2004) maintain that learning critical thinking is useful for essay writing because one can learn how to organize your thoughts, state your claims clearly, and avoid ineffective and counterproductive language" (p.41). Cotton (2002) also states that "debate can be an effective means of teaching Western rhetorical patterns which are used not only in oral argumentation, but in composition as well . . . stating arguments clearly and providing meaningful

support points can be easily applied to written modes of communication” (p.69). Kayashima (2009) taught an essay writing class for university freshmen using debate, and reported that the students were able to state their theses clearly and support them with well-grounded arguments. Kimura (1998) compared two university writing classes; the control group of students had traditional writing practices such as grammar and translation, and wrote many essays, while the experimental group of students engaged in debate. Having compared the English essays written by both groups of students, Kimura reported that the latter group of students’ essays was significantly better in argument, organization, and communicative quality.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 31 first-year Japanese university students (27males and 4 females) majoring in engineering at a private university in the Kanto area. As none of the participants had lived outside of Japan, they had all studied English for at least six years in Japanese secondary schools. This university is one of the highly privileged universities in Japan. It is very competitive to enter this university, so most of the students had a high proficiency in English, especially reading and grammar. As for writing skills, with the help of a dictionary, they were able to express their opinions in English, with a few mistakes in grammar and vocabulary.

3.2. Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire that contains nine questions in Japanese (See Appendix). The first five questions are 1. “Debate activity was interesting,” 2. “Debate activity was difficult,” 3. “Debate activity was useful to practice expressing my opinions in English,” 4. “Debate activity was useful to learn critical and logical thinking,” and 5. “I want to do this activity again.” The students were asked to rate their feelings toward each question using the six-point Likert scale; 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly disagree,

4 = slightly agree, 5 = agree, and 6 = strongly agree. Question six asked which activity was the most difficult: constructive speech, refutation, or counter-argument. The students rated 1 for the most difficult part of the debate and 3 for the least difficult. Question seven asked students to write down why they felt that part was the most difficult. Question eight asked, “What did you learn from this debate activity?” In the final question, students were asked to write any comments about the debate activity.

3.3. Procedure

In a freshman writing class, I included debate activity in the second semester. The students had already learned the basic structure of paragraph writing in the first semester and submitted a one-paragraph English essay as their final course work. In the second semester, in order to improve their English writing skills as well as critical and logical thinking, debate activity was introduced.

On the first day of the debate, the students were divided into three-member groups, each of which conducted a debate with another group. I had the students select a proposition and decide which group would take the affirmative or negative side. For instance, one group decided to discuss the proposition, “English should be taught in elementary school,” with the affirmative side arguing that English should be taught and the negative side arguing against the idea.

In the next class, each group wrote a constructive speech for their proposition. Since each of the three members of a group wrote one constructive speech, there were three constructive speeches for every group. An example of an affirmative constructive speech was “It is easier for young children to learn a foreign language, so English should be taught in elementary school.” An example of a negative constructive speech was “The introduction of a new subject will be a burden for elementary school children.” I told the students to explain their constructive speeches with details, so they supported their constructive speeches with facts or their own experiences.

In the third class, the constructive speeches were exchanged between the affirmative and negative sides. Then each student wrote a refutation for each constructive speech. For example, a negative side student argued against the

affirmative constructive speech, “It is easier for young children to learn a foreign language,” as follows; “Children should concentrate on learning Japanese rather than English because there are many Japanese people who cannot use Japanese properly.”

In the fourth class, the refutations were exchanged between the two sides and they wrote counter-arguments for each refutation. For example, the affirmative side student argued against the above-mentioned refutation as follows: “Learning two languages at the same time is not a burden but it can be a great benefit because children can discover the similarity and difference between the two languages and this will enable them to acquire the two languages more easily.” Finally, another group of students read these writings and judged whether the affirmative or negative side won.

On the last day of the class, the 31 students of the writing class answered the questionnaire about the debate activity they had engaged in the class.

4. Results

The results of the students’ answers from Questions 1 to 5 are shown in Table 1. In Question one, 77% of the students said the debate was more or less interesting, while 22 % said it wasn’t. Most of the students in the class seemed to enjoy debating. In the second question, one-fourth of the students felt the debate was not difficult, while the other students felt it difficult. Which activity they felt difficult was answered in Question seven, which I will look at later. In Question three, all of the students agreed that engaging in a debate activity was good practice for them to express their opinions in English. In Question four, more than 80 % of the students said that debate helped them to learn critical and logical thinking skills. In Question five, I did not receive positive answers from 58 % of the students; however 42 % of the students said they wanted to do the debate again, and among them five students were very enthusiastic about engaging in another debate.

Table 1. *Results of questions 1 to 5*

| | strongly disagree | disagree | slightly disagree | slightly agree | agree | strongly agree |
|----------------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|----------|----------------|
| 1. interesting | 2 (6%) | 1 (3%) | 4 (13%) | 9 (29%) | 11 (35%) | 4 (13%) |
| 2. difficult | 2 (6%) | 0 (0%) | 6 (19%) | 9 (29%) | 10 (32%) | 4 (13%) |
| 3. writing practice | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 8 (26%) | 15 (48%) | 6 (26%) |
| 4. critical& logical | 1 (3%) | 2 (6%) | 3 (10%) | 7 (23%) | 14 (45%) | 4 (13%) |
| 5. do it again | 3 (10%) | 4 (13%) | 11 (35%) | 8 (26%) | 0 (0%) | 5 (16%) |

Question six asked which activity was the most difficult, constructive speech, refutation, or counter-argument, and Question seven asked students to write down why they felt that activity was most difficult. Twenty (65%) students answered that counter-argument was the most difficult. The main reason is that the refutations were usually good, so it was difficult to argue against those refutations while connecting their counter-argument with their own constructive speech at the same time. One student explained how writing a counter-argument can be a difficult task by saying that counter-argument is like overcoming the weak point of his own constructive speech, so it is very hard. Next, nine (29%) students said that constructive speech was most difficult. As one group consisted of three members, I had each group write three constructive speeches for a proposition. However, it was difficult for them to think about three different constructive speeches. Other students said that it was not easy to make a constructive speech that can stand regardless of the opponent’s refutation. Only two (6%) students considered refutation to be the most difficult. They said that it was not easy to write a good persuasive refutation that can make the opponent’s counter-argument difficult. From these results, it can be said that the students were mostly better at refuting the constructive speech. However, because many students’ refutations were good, it was difficult to counter-argue against them.

Question eight asked, “What did you learn from this debate activity?” Nine students pointed out the difficulty of expressing their ideas in English. Eight students said that since their writings were read by other students, they felt the

need to convey their opinions to other students correctly, while some students found out that explicit examples and their own experiences are very effective to convey their thoughts to others. Several students complained that their ideas were not properly understood by other students who refuted them wrongly. Three students realized the importance of listening to other students' opinions because they could hear very different opinions from theirs. One student was surprised that his opinion unexpectedly had a weak point which was refuted by his opponent. Another student connected this debate activity with essay writing by saying that the next time he writes an essay, he will be more conscious of the readers' refutations.

The final question asked for any comments about the debate. Four students said that they now want to engage in oral debating. Two students wanted to have a longer time for debate activity. Two students said that they had never done English debate before, so they were happy to experience it. There was one negative comment saying that the student was very anxious because due to this activity other students would know his poor English ability. Two students pointed out improvements. One student suggested that it would be better if affirmative sides and negative sides talked about the topic before they really engaged in debate. Another student wanted to learn in more detail how to structure opinions and refute effectively.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I reported how I used debate in an English writing class and how the students responded to it. Although most of the students were not familiar with debate, many enjoyed debating and thought it useful especially for English writing practice. However, less than half (42%) of the students said they wanted to do this activity again. Even those who enjoyed debating did not want to do it again. This is probably because they felt that debating in English was very difficult. According to the questionnaire, while they considered counter-argument very difficult, most of them found refutation less so. In other words, for them it was not so difficult to find the weakness of others' opinions, but they felt they

were not very good at responding after their weak points were attacked. In order to make the activity easier for them, it would be better to give many examples of counter-arguments. Moreover, many students referred to the difficulty of expressing their opinions in English, so presenting useful expressions before the debate would be very effective.

Many people tend to think that debate activity is useful for English speaking classes, but it is also effective in English writing classes. This is because debate activity helps students to learn how to write English essays. In my class, students became more careful in writing strong supporting sentences that will not be refuted easily by others. During the debate, they wrote supporting details being conscious of the reader, so they learned to use detailed examples and explanations, and to construct the statements logically in order to make themselves understood much better.

I also found out that debating on paper is less stressful than debating orally. Especially for the Japanese students who traditionally tend not to refute to other people's opinions, debating on paper may be emotionally more comfortable. Because they do not have to attack other people face-to-face, they are more likely to feel that they are not attacking the person but the opinion itself.

Overall, debate activity was very useful in my class. I hope more teachers will introduce debate activity in their classes, especially in English writing classes.

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Appendix

ディベートに関するアンケート

授業で行ったディベートについて、以下の尺度で質問に答えて下さい。

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|--------------|------------|---------------|------------|----------|------------|
| 全くそう 思わない | そう 思わない | あまりそう 思わない | 少しそう 思う | そう 思う | 全くそう 思う |

1. おもしろかった 1 2 3 4 5 6
2. 難しかった 1 2 3 4 5 6
3. 自分の考えを英語で書く練習として役に立った 1 2 3 4 5 6
4. 批判的・論理的思考を学ぶ練習として役に立った 1 2 3 4 5 6
5. またやりたい 1 2 3 4 5 6
6. 難しいと思った順に1,2,3と番号をふってください。(1=もっとも難しい)

() 立論 () 反駁 () 再反駁

7.上の質問で、一番難しいと感じたのはなぜですか。その理由を書いてください。

8.ディベート活動を通じて、あなたが学んだと思うことを書いてください。

9.その他に何か意見がありましたら、書いてください。